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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the use of colleagues as consultants or catalysts in the teaching improvement, or change, process. The paper covers four topics in this area: (1) the recipient of feedback; (2) the relationship between the feedback giver and the feedback receiver; (3) the feedback message; and (4) costs of feedback programs. Although the effectiveness of using colleagues as consultants in the teaching improvement process has yet to be validated experimentally in terms of student outcomes, faculty participants in such programs report high satisfaction, increased motivation, renewed interest in teaching, and increased interaction with other faculty members. (CB)

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COLLEAGUES AS CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE IN TEACHING

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Colleagues as Catalysts for Change in Teaching

Colleagues are a potentially powerful source of information for improving teaching. This paper discusses ways college teachers might receive informational feedback on teaching from their colleagues and considers how such feedback affects subsequent teaching.

Underlying the discussion is an analogy with chemistry which compares colleagues with catalysts. The analogy reminds us of the "chemistry" between teacher and students and implies that teacher-student "reactions" can be productively affected by the presence of a colleague. As catalyst, a colleague may speed up the reaction or otherwise alter its effects.

I shall return to this analogy at the conclusion of the paper.

Most feedback researchers at the postsecondary level--and we have critically analyzed nearly 60 studies (Menges, Brinko, & L'Hommedieu, 1986)--have studied feedback using student ratings of courses and teachers. It is clear from a meta-analysis of 30 of those studies that the impact of student ratings feedback is considerably enhanced by augmenting it with consultation and/or with additional forms of feedback (L'Hommedieu, Brinko, & Menges, 1986). What is not so clear are the reasons for the consultation effect. Reports of research provide few details about the consultation process or about the characteristics of those who serve as consultants. Studies using peer and colleague consultation rather than student ratings tend to be narrative and qualitative, not lending themselves to

meta-analysis. Consequently, the present discussion of colleagues' role draws primarily on qualitative studies in postsecondary education and on conceptualizations from other fields, particularly from organizational behavior.

This paper is organized into four sections: the recipient of feedback, the relationship between the feedback giver and the feedback receiver, the feedback message, and the topic of costs.

The Recipient

The term "recipient" probably should be avoided, since it implies a role more passive than active. The likely alternative term "client" is also undesirable because it implies dependence. Even more objectionable is the image brought to mind by a recent article in a prominent journal; the authors describe the first step in a faculty development program as "setting up a surveillance system" (Fuller & Evans, 1985, p. 32). The term "victim" would probably be most appropriate in that environment.

I prefer, instead, a situation where initiatives rest with the faculty member. As college teachers, we are no less inclined than people in general to ask how we are doing, to scan the environment for information about the consequences of what we do, and to make adjustments based on that information. In other words, college teachers are naturally inclined to seek and use feedback. That natural inclination is easily destroyed by programs, however well intentioned, where participation is imposed. Such programs

come to be perceived as serving primarily institutional purposes. Feedback then functions more as an organizational resource than as a personal resource.

A more appropriate way of viewing colleagues is implied by the term "feedback-seeking behavior" which Ashford and Cummings use in a significant article in Organizational Behavior and Human Performance (1983). To acknowledge that colleagues are **active feedback seekers** means dealing with them as designers of programs and of services rather than solely as the objects of such programs and services. In this view, decisions about participation in teaching improvement programs rest with the faculty member. I suggest that we think of our colleagues neither as objects of assistance nor as recipients of services nor as clients of consultants but primarily as active feedback seekers.

The Relationship between Feedback Giver and Feedback Seeker

Approaches vary a good deal with regard to the level of **expertise** about teaching and learning which the feedback giver is expected to have relative to the feedback seeker. The minimum expertise which facilitates teaching improvement is unknown, but a teaching specialist, responding to a request for feedback, may help in several ways. The specialist may offer precise terminology for talking about teaching and learning, share new perspectives from which to view issues, and suggest new strategies which contribute to change. Caution is advised, however, since expertise in excess

is intimidating. While some faculty prefer the fairly formal professional relationship with a consultant, others prefer a close, informal relationship with a peer.

The feedback giver/feedback seeker relationship should be emotionally supportive in order to encourage sharing frustrations as well as successes. In their discussion of staff development for precollege teachers, Joyce, Hersh, and McKibbon (1983) note that one important function of the faculty teams with whom they work is to provide **companionship**. Companionship, at least around teaching activities, is all too rare among postsecondary faculty.

In any case, a relationship where the feedback giver is of higher **status** is to be avoided. One study with precollege teachers (Tuckman and Oliver, 1968) found that feedback from students improved teacher performance, but feedback from supervisors actually decreased performance. Presumably student feedback was more credible since students regularly come to class and supervisors do not. When administrators, colleagues of more senior rank, or others involved in institutional review processes provide the feedback, faculty are likely to feel threatened and their natural feedback seeking behaviors may be inhibited.

Each of these characteristics of the feedback giver/feedback seeker relationship--expertise, companionship, and status--deserves further study.

A program at the University of Minnesota called Coordinate Status Consultation (Dalgaard, Simpson, and Carrier, 1982) illustrates one programatic approach. "The faculty member brings his knowledge of his content area and his teaching environment to the relationship. The consultant provides his expertise in examining teaching concerns and facilitating change" (p. 7). These roles are complimentary and permit the consultant to act as a facilitator of change while the teacher retains power for making decisions about goals, data to be collected, and changes to be made. These authors use the term "consultant" but avoid its counterpart "client." Their approach requires active feedback seeking by the teacher while taking advantage of the consultant's expertise.

A second example, which emphasizes equality in both status and expertise, comes from the work of Katz and Henry at several teaching oriented institutions (Katz, 1985) and now at four research institutions, including my own. A colleague visits class meetings of a teacher with whom he or she has been paired, and each of them interviews students in the class who have been selected by comparing their thinking styles with those of the teacher. Colleagues meet regularly to compare impressions. In a subsequent quarter, roles are reversed and the observer becomes the observed. The two are equal in status and presumably also share equivalent expertise about teaching and learning. Supportive companionship and active feedback seeking are essential in such relationships.

The Feedback Message

With regard to **content** of the feedback message, we are limited for the most part to speculation. It is impossible to know what is discussed in most teaching improvement consultations because published descriptions are so sketchy. One group of studies is an exception. In about a half dozen studies, classroom interaction data comprise part of the feedback information. Each study finds interaction analysis feedback to be associated with change in subsequent teaching. Why is this feedback apparently so potent? Perhaps because interaction data are seen as precise, objective, irrefutable, and as carrying implicit prescriptions. Thought might be given to how information on other aspects of instruction might be made similarly persuasive.

It can be argued that the most valuable feedback from colleagues is not about teaching activities but rather about teaching materials such as syllabi, assignments, and examinations. Colleagues can make more knowledgeable comments on accuracy and currency of those materials than can anyone else. The closer the colleague is to the specialty of the course, the more credible such feedback will be.

When feedback deals with teaching activities, on the other hand, a colleague's detailed knowledge of course content may hinder rather than help. Conversations tend to focus on substantive details which are less pertinent than data about teacher or student behavior. One task of colleague/observers is to take the role of naive learner, but it is even more difficult for a

colleague from the same discipline to assume that role than it is for one from a distant discipline.

With regard to **form** of the feedback message, it appears that faculty give greater credibility to information which comes in discursive form, such as student written comments, than to information reported quantitatively, such as student ratings (Ory & Braskamp, 1981; Clark & Bergstrom, 1983). Research on communicating results of program evaluations to decision makers finds that nonwritten messages (audiotaped or videotaped) are more persuasive than those which are in written form alone (Ripley, 1985).

To incorporate such findings into the teaching improvement process, a feedback giver might select student comments and present them verbally to a colleague. It is critical that comments be chosen which are representative and that they be presented in a context of possibilities for change.

Costs

The major cost of teaching improvement approaches which rely on feedback from colleagues lies in contributed time, and that cost may be considerable. Other costs, however, are likely to be relatively low. Ashford and Cummings (1983) distinguish three categories of costs for feedback programs in organizations: effort costs, face loss costs, and inference costs.

Costs in the **effort** expended to obtain feedback will be low if colleagues are more readily available than are other sources of feedback and if they are well informed about the context in which teaching occurs. Costs

in **loss of face**--that is, risk of personal embarrassment--will be low if colleagues are trustworthy and if confidentiality of the relationship is assured. Finally, **inference** costs will be low if interaction with a colleague successfully reduces or avoids errors in interpreting feedback.

Conclusion

Effectiveness of colleagues as consultants in the teaching improvement process has yet to be validated experimentally in terms of student outcomes. As far as faculty participants are concerned, however, findings are clear: participants report high satisfaction, increased motivation, renewed interest in teaching, and increased interaction with other faculty members.

Returning to the chemistry analogy, we can now identify some conditions associated with situations where colleagues affect "reactions" between faculty and their students. The teacher must be an active agent in these reactions, i.e., an active feedback seeker, and the environment must be favorable for the reaction, e.g., costs must not be inhibitive. Finally, it is important to note that when the reaction occurs it affects not only the teacher and students but the feedback giver as well. A colleague enters into the reaction and is inevitably changed by the experience.

That both feedback giver and feedback seeker are changed contradicts the common meaning of catalyst, i.e., a substance remaining unaltered in the reaction. Although these effects on the colleague may weaken the analogy with chemistry, they are a definite bonus for programs to improve teaching.

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